Having His Way

CITIZEN PEROT
His Life and Times
By Gerald Posner
Random House. 400 pp. $25

By Michael Kazin

WHO COULD BE more American than Ross Perot? He's the big boss with a common touch, a self-made billionaire who's unafraid of tackling the nation's most difficult problems, a zealous patriot with a fondness for soldiers of fortune and conspiracy theories. And, of course, he's the prime mover (and likely presidential candidate) of a third party energized by little more than a desire to throw all the bums out.

Now, Perot is likely to be one more prominent American who despises his biographer. On the surface, Gerald Posner's briskly written book has no message. He begins by thanking Perot for submitting to several long interviews and for supplying many documents, including a synopsis of his life. Balance, announces the author, is his goal: "The Perot I came to know is complex and contradictory. He engenders fealty and esteem . . . but also fear and contempt." In sharp contrast with his last book, on the JFK assassination, Posner eschews grand interpretation, confining himself to stitching together a lavish quilt of tales—many old, some new—about his billionaire politician's extraordinary achievements and tempestuous personality.

But the portrait condemns through the sheer accumulation of unpleasant detail. Since Perot left the Navy in 1955 (disgusted that "Godless" profanity and promiscuity were condoned in the ranks), he has succeeded with one simple method: focus on a goal and destroy anything or anybody that gets in your way. In the late '50s, he became IBM's "super-salesman" and then raided the company's clients and staff to start his own data-processing firm, Electronic Data Systems (EDS). In the '60s, he made EDS's name and treasure by securing a huge, exclusive contract with Medicare. Then he escaped possible indictment for overcharging by getting close to the Johnson and Nixon administrations and refusing to open his books. In the '80s, he sold his company to General Motors in a friendly merger for almost $1 billion in cash and then snookered his giant partner into buying him out two years later for another $700 million. "It was an opportunity to rape an elephant," exulted a Perot associate when the original deal with GM was struck. Soon, the can-do man had his way with the beast.

Posner amply documents how Perot bullies and lies in pursuit of his dreams. At EDS, he forced employees to follow a rigid dress code (men partial to blue shirts were called "sissies") and motivated them with routine tongue-lashings, directed especially at women ("He treated me like a dog, but I made a fortune because of him," remembers one). He twice urged magazine editors to kill negative stories, offering to assume all the costs if the issues in question were canceled. And he paid a million-dollar advance to writer Ken Follett in order to glorify his part in rescuing two EDS managers from an Iranian prison. Both Follett and his patron neglected the fact that a revolutionary crowd had actually freed the men from jail. "If he thinks he is right," acknowledges Perot's only son, Ross Jr., "that is all that matters."

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PHOTO BY KEITH JENKINS—THE WASHINGTON POST

H. Ross Perot with supporters and the press in front of the U.S. Capitol in 1993

In politics, that trait has paid big dividends. During his 1992 campaign, Perot repudiated the cautious rhetorical banalities long practiced by standard-bearers of the major parties. His brash promises to balance the budget and restore prosperity, enlivened with sharp yet homespun metaphors, spoke to the fears of a nation in decline. Electing Ross as "boss" was a quick way to reverse the slide. Perot surprised most pundits by gaining almost 19 percent of the vote; his subsequent ability to launch a new national party has confounded them further.

Yet, as Posner details, cocksureness has its limits. Perot exerted iron control over his grass-roots operation, firing paid activists who displeased him. He also courted trouble by ad-libbing many speeches, such as one to the NAACP (where he lectured "you people"). And he invited the media's ridicule with unsupported stories about a Black Panther hit squad and a Republican plot to disrupt his daughter's wedding. Outrage and sarcasm were the billionaire's sole response to criticism.

It was Perot's fear of GOP "dirty tricks," contends Posner, that caused his temporary withdrawal from the presidential race. Here, it seems, the rough tycoon betrayed the gullible side of his nature. He accepted, as fact, tall tales told by one Scott Barnes, an army veteran with a long history of making false statements. (Barnes had also briefly involved the FBI in a scheme to entrap a top Republican official from Texas.) But when the Bureau concluded that Barnes was faking, Perot refused to believe it. The once and future candidate told 60 Minutes, "We've got a squirrelly situation in the FBI . . . Sounds like it's politics to me." Then, characteristically, he barked at reporters who questioned his evidence.

As Posner's telling of the Barnes incident demonstrates, *Citizen Perot* has all the virtues of a good campaign book—immediacy, sound reporting based on extensive interviews, and access to its subject. But the genre also dictates the scope of the work. For the most part, what they said is what you get.

One learns almost nothing about why Perot inspires so much devotion, both among many former employees and his loyal campaigners. His independent run in 1992 did, after all, generate an avalanche of volunteers and huge audiences for the candidate's prime-time interviews and infomercials. And now, the Reform Party may be mounting the first serious and persistent challenge to two-party dominance since the People's Party a century ago. Yet Posner concerns himself only with his man's undeniable foibles and triumphs.

PONDERING the meaning of Ross Perot, I kept thinking of "Meet John Doe," my favorite film by that great chronicler of Americana, Frank Capra. In the movie (released when Ross Perot was a 10-year-old paper boy), Gary Cooper plays an ingenuous, kind-hearted hobo who was once a promising baseball pitcher. Goaded and financed by a tycoon named D.B. Norton (played by Edward Arnold), the hobo inspires a grass-roots network of "John Doe Clubs," composed of Americans who believe teamwork and charity can cure what ails their beloved nation.

But Norton is a fraud. A lover of authoritarian trappings, including his own uniformed motorcycle corps, he is merely using the John Doe clubs as a vehicle for his presidential ambitions. The film mixes cynicism about democracy with Capra's trademark bathos about ordinary people.

Remarkably, Ross Perot manages to be both John Doe and D.B. Norton. He is a crafty, mean insider who throws his money around and a plain-speaking populist who has faith that average folks can, with his help, figure out where the country went wrong and how to fix it. Gerald Posner tells us too little about how Perot has persuaded several million people that he should be sitting in the White House. But most readers will put down this book hoping he never gets the chance. ■

Taking Their Stands

UP FROM CONSERVATISM
Why the Right Is Wrong for America
By Michael Lind
Free Press. 295 pp. $23

WHAT'S RIGHT
The New Conservative Majority and the Remaking of America
By David Frum
Basic Books. 208 pp. $23

By Matthew Dallek

I CAN see it now: Pat Buchanan, Michael Kinsley, Michael Lind and David Frum are sitting anxiously around a table. The lights go up, the cameras roll, the theme music begins, and Kinsley announces the topic for the latest episode of "Crossfire": Conservatism—good or bad for America? Judging by their latest books, Lind and Frum would provide plenty of fireworks. The authors are so far apart in their assessments of American conservatism that they would probably spend the entire episode arguing over whether the right is an evil threat to the body politic or the last great hope of man on earth.

For the moment, though, we have to be content with their debate in written form—no small consolation. The far more interesting and controversial of the two books is Lind's *Up from Conservatism*. Lind is a senior editor at the New Yorker and a former William Buckley protege. The two positions don't square, of course, but then again Lind is not your typical liberal. In the late 1980s, after a brief, disappointing stint in graduate school at Yale (where, Lind writes, "I encountered left-liberalism in all of its folly and fury"), he joined what he thought was an increasingly moderate conservative movement devoted to the economic plight of the middle class.

But he began to grow suspicious of his new comrades-in-arms during the 1990 budget debate. George Bush had agreed to raise taxes to reduce the deficit, a sound fiscal move in Lind's eyes. When the right began lambasting the president as a liberal and a traitor, Lind recoiled in shock. Then, in 1992, he got really mad. At the Republican presidential convention Pat Buchanan called for a "cultural war" to reclaim the soul of America. When Bush met with Pat Robertson in the presidential box, Lind decided that the crackpots had taken over the Republican Party and that enough was enough. He noisily withdrew from the conservative movement and embarked on a journey which has, in some ways, culminated in the publication of *Up from Conservatism*.

The book is a withering denunciation of the American right. Conservatism, Lind announces, is dead, hijacked by cultural and religious extremists like Buchanan and Robertson. A movement that in the 1980s seemed to Lind on the verge of revitalizing the center of American politics succumbed to the "kooks" on the far right. "How," Lind asks, "did this disaster happen?"

Since the 1960s, he argues, the United States has under- *—Continued on page 10*

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